

# Reach For The Spy

Book 3 of the NEVER SAY SPY series

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The town of Silverside and all secret technologies are products of my imagination. If I'm abducted by grim-faced men wearing dark glasses, or if I die in an unexplained fiery car crash, you'll know I accidentally came a little too close to the truth.

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## CHAPTER 1

A faint noise woke me. My eyes flew open and I held my breath, listening. Had the sound come from outside the open window? I strained my ears, but heard only the usual quiet of a July night in the country.

A tiny, metallic click from the doorknob made me change the rhythm of my breathing, slow and deep. I let my eyelids droop so I could watch the door through the fringe of my lashes.

Damn that shaft of moonlight. It fell directly across me in the bed, but the doorway itself was in shadow.

The door swung open slowly and silently. A large, dark figure moved toward my bed.

I emitted a small snore followed by a deep sigh and rolled over, letting the bedsheet fall away as I reached under the opposite pillow and clenched my fist around the crowbar. The moonlight emphasized the curves and hollows of my naked body. The intruder froze, staring.

That's right, asshole. Take a good look. It'll be the last thing you ever see. Just come a little closer, now...

He turned away abruptly, and I was instantly in motion. The crowbar hurtled toward his temple in a flat, vicious arc with all my strength behind it.

"Aydan."

At the sound of his whisper, I let out a yelp of dismay. I tried desperately to slow and alter the trajectory of my weapon, but it connected solidly with his head. He fell.

Heart pounding, I floundered toward the huddled form on the floor. As I reached him, he sat up slowly. I flung myself on him from behind, one arm across his massive chest while my other hand clamped over his mouth.

“We’re bugged,” I breathed urgently in his ear.

His large hand closed around my wrist, and I let him pull my hand away from his mouth.

“I know,” he said in normal tones. “I’m jamming them.”

I collapsed onto the floor behind him, gasping. “Jesus fucking Christ, John! Don’t ever fucking do that! I nearly fucking killed you, for chrissake!” If frequent use of obscenities indicated one’s level of intellect, I’d apparently dropped about a hundred IQ points in the last couple of seconds.

“I noticed.” He touched his head, and his fingers came away dark in the moonlight.

“Shit!” I started to scramble up, but he grabbed my arm.

“Don’t turn on any lights.”

“I need to look at that,” I argued. “I was going for a home run until the last second. You’re bleeding.”

“I’ll live. It just glanced off.”

I blew out an irritated breath and knelt beside him to trace my fingers through his hair, exploring the sticky area near the top of his head. At least there wasn’t any squishiness that would indicate a fracture.

I stepped across him into my ensuite bathroom and came out with a clean washcloth. “Here.”

He accepted it and pressed it against his head. He glanced up at me, and then looked away quickly. "Aydan... Could you please put some clothes on? This is really... distracting."

"Oh!" I glanced down at my white skin, practically glowing in the moonlight. My forty-six-year-old body was in pretty good shape except for the extra ten pounds or so around the middle. I'd never been shy about it. And getting naked with John Kane was near the top of my private list of things to do, but I was pretty sure braining him with a crowbar didn't qualify as foreplay.

Anyway, it didn't matter. Now was not the time. I stepped quickly to the chair in the corner where I kept my clothes laid out for quick access. I pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt before turning back to him.

"Can you stand up?" I asked.

He rose. "I'm fine. We need to talk." He sat on the edge of the bed and I perched beside him.

The moonlight made a dramatic study of his strong, square features. His silvered temples gleamed against his short, dark hair as he turned to eye me piercingly in the pale light.

"How did you find the bugs?" he demanded. "Do you have a scanner?"

"No. I found them the good old-fashioned way. Is Stemp monitoring them?"

"Yes. How did you know you were bugged?"

"I smelled them."

His dark brows snapped together. "What?"

I grinned. "Stemp needs to be more careful choosing his minions. Whoever he sent to install the bugs was a smoker who wore cologne. I smelled him the instant I came in the house. I checked everything over, and when I couldn't find anything missing, I started to look for things that had been added."

Kane nodded slowly. "You're good."

I peered at him in the moonlight. "What the hell are you doing here? Dammit, Stemp is going to notice the bugs are jammed. I didn't want him to know I knew about them."

"He won't know. I got Webb to generate a circular loop to feed the monitor. We have an hour."

"You got Spider involved in this, too? What if you get caught?" I demanded. "It was bad enough when Stemp just thought you were sympathetic toward me. If he finds out about this, you're going to be next on his hit list, right after he whacks me."

He went still, watching me. "What makes you say that?"

"Come on, John. It's not rocket science. Stemp needs me right now, but he doesn't trust me because he can't manipulate me. The instant he's got an alternative, I'm going to get a lead suppository."

I sighed. "In fact, you'll probably be the one to get the order. That's what I'd do if I was Stemp. If you carry out the order to kill me, you keep your job. And live. If you refuse, he passes the order down the food chain to get rid of both of us. And on down the line to get rid of anybody else who isn't willing to follow orders. Get all the housecleaning done at once."

"That's the most paranoid, cynical thing I've ever heard you say."

"Yeah. Tell me I'm wrong."

He blew out a breath. "So that's what you were trying to tell me when you walked away from me last week. You were warning me to keep my distance. To protect me."

"Yeah. And here you are. Shit."

"Will you stop trying to protect everybody else and start looking out for yourself for a change? I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself."

I sighed inwardly. He sure was a big boy. In every sense of the word, from what I'd had the opportunity to observe. Too bad he had to be permanently off-limits if I wanted him to stay alive.

“I know you can take care of yourself,” I agreed. “But Stemp was watching us, and I wanted to make sure he didn’t see anything that would make him mistrust you. He’s your boss, after all. You’ll still have to work with him long after I’m gone.”

His brows drew together. “What you said last week... About how I’d follow orders no matter what. Do you really believe that? That I’m nothing more than a robot following orders?”

I hesitated, trying to find the right words. “No... But... that’s what Stemp needs you to be. And that’s the safest thing for you to be right now.”

“You really think I’d kill you if he gave me the order.” His voice was even, but I could hear the edge of suppressed hurt and anger.

“John...” I sighed and tugged my fingers through my long hair, yanking out the night’s tangles. “You’re one of our government’s top agents. You’ve spent most of your life in military and law enforcement. That tells me your top priority is doing the right thing for this country. Am I right?”

“Of course.” He frowned at me in the shadows. “Where are you going with this?”

“What if it turns out that it’s the right thing for you to kill me?”

He jerked back. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? Think it through. Right now, I’m both incredibly valuable and incredibly dangerous. I can crack any data encryption, and I’m working for our government. Valuable. But I’m a civilian and Stemp doesn’t trust me. As soon as he finds another way to break the encryption, I’ll stop being valuable, and then all that’s left is the danger that our enemies will scoop me up. He can’t afford the risk.”

“You’d never turn traitor,” he said with certainty. “I’ve seen the sacrifices you’ve made.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. But I know what groups like Fuzzy Bunny will do to get what they want. As long as I’m alive, there’s the risk that I’ll be captured.” I looked him square in the eyes. “I’m no hero. I don’t have any illusions about how long I’d withstand torture. So killing me might be the right thing for everybody, including me. Would you refuse that order?”

He sat silently, frowning. Finally, he said, “That’s what you meant. When you said Stemp would be doing you a favour if he killed you.”

“Yeah, something like that.” I changed the subject. “So is Stemp actually evil, or is he just an asshole?”

“He’s a ruthless bastard,” Kane said slowly. “I can’t always agree with his methods, but nobody can argue with his results. Since he took over as civilian director two years ago, we’ve had major improvements in our operations. You shouldn’t have threatened him.”

“That wasn’t a threat. It was a sincere promise. If he does anything to harm anybody I care about, I will utterly destroy him. Or die trying.”

He laughed suddenly. “Aydan, you’re crazy.”

I grinned at him. “You’re just discovering that now? What made you come to that conclusion after all this time?”

“Even when you can’t possibly win, you fight anyway. Stemp has people and resources you can’t even imagine. And you’re relying on your nose to sniff out bugs.”

I raised a shoulder and gave him a half-smile. “I learned long ago that being willing to fight is sometimes enough to prevent the fight in the first place. Sometimes you win, just because anybody in their right mind would know that you can’t possibly win.”

He sobered. “Aydan, you can’t possibly win this one.”

“Ah. Victory will be mine, then. So why are you here? You thought it'd be nice to pop by and get your brains bashed in? You know damn well I keep a crowbar under my pillow. What the hell were you thinking?”

His lips twisted wryly. “Yes, I knew about the crowbar. But I thought you were asleep. No woman would intentionally throw off the sheets and lie there naked if she thought there was an intruder in the house.”

“It worked, didn't it?” I smirked at him. “Someday that ‘most women’ stereotype is going to jump up and bite you. Or crush your skull with a crowbar. You knew I was armed and dangerous, and you still turned your back on me because of your preconceptions.”

“I was trying to be a gentleman.”

“And it nearly got you killed.”

“What if I'd been a murderer or a rapist? What if I hadn't turned my back? Where's your clever strategy then?”

I shrugged. “Tell me you noticed when I reached under the pillow. You didn't, did you? Because you weren't looking at my hand.”

He shifted uncomfortably on the bed. “True,” he admitted reluctantly.

“So it didn't really matter to me whether you turned away or not,” I told him. “Either way, I got a weapon into my hand without you noticing. I might not have won the fight, but at least I had a chance.”

“And you'd fight even if you couldn't win.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “Now you're getting it. So why are you here? We're wasting our hour.”

## CHAPTER 2

Kane blew out a breath of frustration, or maybe resignation. “I wanted to make sure you knew about the bugs and cameras. And I didn’t want to leave things the way we left them last week.”

“Cameras? Shit! Please tell me he’s set up a perimeter outside.”

“Yes.”

“But not inside anywhere?”

“No.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding. “Good. I’ve been kind of creeped out about getting naked ever since I found the bugs. I figured cameras wouldn’t be far behind. I went over this place with a fine-toothed comb, but I was afraid I’d missed something.”

“Don’t worry. So far, the only cameras are outside. If that changes, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks. Where are they?”

“There’s complete coverage of the exterior of your house, and about a twenty-five foot radius around it. One camera in the eaves of your garage, one in the tree at the back, one on the shed, and another on the back fence.”

“Any blind spots?”

“No.”

“So how did you get in?”

“Webb looped a thirty-second segment for the front door camera, one segment at the beginning of the hour, and one at the end so I can get out again.”

I sighed. “I really wish you hadn’t involved Spider. You know Stemp intimidates him. And he’s just a kid. He’s just starting his career. I’d hate to see that jeopardized because of me.”

“Aydan,” Kane said. “He’s twenty-six. He’s old enough to make his own decisions. And he’s the one who came up with the idea of looping the cameras and audio. He was furious that Stemp treated you that way after all you’d done for us.”

“Oh.” I thought about that for a moment. “Did I mention I really appreciate you risking your life and your career to come here and warn me?”

“No.”

“Sorry.” I took his hand and squeezed it. “I really appreciate you coming here. Thanks. And I’m really sorry about bashing you in the head.” I stood up and pulled him with me. “Come on.”

He hung back warily. “Where are we going?”

“Into the closet.”

“Because...?”

“Come on!” I tugged him toward the walk-in closet. “Because I can turn on the light in there without it being visible from outside. I need to look at your head.”

“I told you, it’s fine.”

“Good. Then there’s no reason to hide it from me.” I pulled him inside the closet and reached past him to close the door and flip the light switch.

We blinked and squinted at each other in the sudden light. “Now, let me see.” I reached up to the bloodied washcloth he still held against his head and gently pulled his hand away.

Even on my tiptoes, my five-foot-ten height wasn't enough to give me a clear view. "Get down here to my level," I commanded. "I can't see the top of your head when you're six inches taller than me."

He blew out an impatient sigh and stooped. I winced at the ugly wound on his scalp. "That's got to hurt."

He shrugged. "I'm still standing. Do I need stitches?"

"No, I don't think so. The bleeding's almost stopped. I'll go and get some peroxide. Lucky you've got thick hair. I don't think it'll be visible once it's cleaned up."

"I told you it was fine. It just glanced off."

"Yeah, yeah." I turned off the light and stumbled to the bathroom in the dark. I grabbed the peroxide bottle and gauze by feel and fumbled back into the closet.

The cleanup complete, I wrapped the blood-stained, peroxide-soaked gauze in the washcloth.

"I'll take that." He held out his hand. "Just in case," he answered my unasked question. "You don't want anything around here that might be hard to explain."

"Guess so." I handed it to him. "Thanks." I flipped off the light again, and we shuffled back to sit on the bed, waiting for our eyes to adjust.

"Where's the crowbar?" Kane asked.

"Why, are you afraid I'll hit you again?"

"No. We need to clean it."

I chuckled. "And this is why you're good at what you do. Details." I rummaged in the sheets until my hand connected with the crowbar. "Here you go."

My eyes still hadn't adjusted, and I heard rather than saw him wipe down the crowbar. I spoke into the darkness. "So what should I expect

tomorrow? I've never been a government asset before. Will Stemp have me monitored every minute I'm at Sirius Dynamics, too?"

His voice was wry. "I'm not exactly sure what you should expect. Being given an asset and told I'm a handler is new to me, too. I think it's a safe bet that Stemp will watch and record your every move. And mine. That's why I wanted to talk to you tonight."

I peered at him in the dimness. "Couldn't we have just gone for coffee or something, instead of the whole cloak and dagger thing?"

"Maybe." He shrugged. "Or maybe not. I won't really know until I see how things are set up tomorrow. I don't know how much control Stemp is going to exert, and I couldn't take a chance that you might say or do something without realizing that you were being watched."

He paused, then continued, "I really wish you hadn't lost your temper. You forced his hand. If you'd just gone along with it, I might have been able to do some damage control."

"He threatened me," I snapped. "That was stupid. If he'd been smart, he would have talked to you first. He could have averted the whole fiasco. Maybe he's been doing great things for your department, but he's a shitty people manager."

Kane sighed. "He's good at what he does, but you're right, General Briggs is a better leader. Briggs would never have taken such a heavy-handed approach, but it's not his jurisdiction."

"But why do you have to listen to Stemp at all? Briggs is your direct superior, isn't he?"

"Yes, and no. Stemp is the director of our INSET team, and my cover is as an RCMP officer with INSET. So I have to walk a fine line."

I sighed. "Bloody politics."

"Yes," he agreed with feeling.

"So do you think maybe we can work out a better way to communicate?" I asked. "Maybe one that doesn't involve panic on my part

and personal injury for you? Because I'd really hate to have to explain to Stemp why I murdered you in my bedroom in the middle of the night."

He laughed. "That's a conversation I'd like to listen in on."

"Except you'd be dead."

"Well, there is that." I could still see the smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Best to keep it simple," he said, sobering. "If I need to talk to you, I'll hand you a black pen at some point during the day. If you need me to come here, you can give me a black pen. Then you can expect me that night. If it's urgent, use a red pen, and I'll figure out a way that we can meet sooner. You'll just have to stay alert for my signal."

"Okay, that works," I agreed.

He checked the illuminated display on his watch. "I have ten minutes left before I have to leave. Do you have any other questions?"

"No, I don't think..."

There was a sudden sharp report, and Kane pitched forward on top of me, the weight of his body pinning me to the bed.

## CHAPTER 3

Kane's gun was already in his hand. He twisted around to search for the source of the sound as he sprawled across me, protecting me with his body.

"It's okay!" I freed one arm from under him with difficulty and gently covered his gun hand. "It's just the stupid roller blind. It fell off its mountings. It did that once before when the breeze got up and I had the window open."

I felt the tension leave him, and he drew in a deep breath as he stowed his gun again. "Get that damn thing fixed!"

"Roger that," I agreed. "Better still, as of this moment, it's garbage."

My heart was still pounding from the shock, but the feel of his muscular body on top of me wasn't doing anything to slow it down, either. Bedroom, moonlight, an incredibly hot guy, and we were already horizontal.

Jeez, somebody up there really hated me.

He gazed down at me for a long moment from inches away, his grey eyes completely black in the dim light.

Then we both sighed simultaneously, and he rolled off me and sat up. We caught each other's eyes and looked away quickly.

"Guess I'll go and get a snack," I said as casually as I could. I rolled off the bed and headed for the kitchen. "Do you want anything?" I asked over my shoulder as he trailed me out of the bedroom.

“Yes, but I can’t have it,” he replied. I glanced back at him, surprised at the uncharacteristic double entendre. He continued without missing a beat, “I’ve only got a few minutes before I have to go.”

“Right.” I pulled the cereal box out of the cupboard in the dark and reached for the fridge door.

His hand closed around my wrist. “Don’t. The light will be visible from outside, and I don’t want any hint of activity on the cameras.”

“Hmmp,” I agreed. I turned back toward the table and felt him stiffen as I brushed against him.

I gazed up at him and steadfastly resisted the urge to pull him down into a kiss. I’d already done that last week. Then, he’d turned me down to protect me. Now, I had to hold back to protect him, too.

I realized he was still holding my wrist and we were gazing into each other’s eyes again. Shit.

I pulled away and stuffed a handful of the dry cereal into my mouth as I sat down at the table. Stay occupied, keep the mouth busy.

He stood wordlessly at the end of the table, watching me crunch my cereal. In a couple of minutes, he checked his watch again and sighed. “See you tomorrow. Lock the door behind me. And turn on your security system again. I disabled it when I came through.”

“Okay.” I followed him to the door and locked up behind him.

I tossed and turned for the rest of the night, and got up feeling tired and edgy at six o’clock. My mood was only marginally improved by a shower and breakfast, and I shuffled irritably to my desk to do some of the entries for one of my bookkeeping clients.

I kept looking at my watch, unable to concentrate. I wasn’t due to see my clients at the Greenhorn Cafe until ten o’clock, and I was anxious about my first afternoon at Sirius Dynamics, the business that concealed the secret government defence research facility. Why hadn’t I told them

I'd be there in the morning instead of at one o'clock? The nervous anticipation was killing me.

The ring of the phone made me jump. When I answered it, a male voice spoke in my ear.

"You the bookkeeper?"

"Yes."

"Taking clients?"

"Yes."

"Bill Harks at the Silverside Hotel. When can you come?"

"I'll be in town this morning. How about nine-thirty?"

"Fine. Don't be late." The phone crashed down in my ear.

Well, that was short and sweet. I'd tacked up my business card in the post office, and I'd managed to get several clients since I'd moved there in March. So far, all my new clients had ranged from pleasant to downright delightful. Apparently the law of averages was about to kick in. I frowned thoughtfully at the phone.

Well, I didn't need to take his business if he was an asshole. But maybe he was just pressed for time. Heaven knew there were days when I'd have appreciated a concise conversation. I shrugged and went back to work.

By nine o'clock, the jitters drove me out of my chair and into my closet to change. I usually tried to overcome my natural slobbish tendencies when meeting a potential client for the first time, but I surveyed my neatly organized business clothes with distaste.

Already, the heat of the day was building in the light breeze that wafted through the window. I would have loved to just go in the baggy jeans and ratty T-shirt that I was wearing.

I sighed and selected a pair of beige dress pants and a cream-coloured sleeveless top that set off my red hair. I'd leave it loose for first

impressions. Most guys liked long red hair, and the curt conversation I'd had with Bill Harks suggested that any advantage would be helpful.

I tossed the waist pouch that served as my purse into a larger, cream-coloured handbag, and headed out the door.

I had a brief moment of self-consciousness when I stepped outside and realized that I was on camera, but I pushed it aside. The bugs had been in place for a few days already, so undoubtedly the cameras had also been recording my comings and goings. I'd just have to remember not to scratch my ass or anything when I was outside the house. For most women, that wouldn't be a problem. Not so for me.

In my garage, I wistfully eyed my half-restored 1953 Chevy. Before Stemp had decided that I was the world's most dangerous weapon, I'd been looking forward to taking some time off this summer to tinker with my cars and suck back some cold suds.

Now I had a bad feeling that my summer was going to be filled with tedious computer work at best, and, at worst, danger and terror like I'd experienced the previous week. I shrugged as I made my way to my faithful '98 Saturn. At least I hadn't actually gotten tortured last week. And I hadn't had to kill anybody, either.

My perception of silver linings had changed a bit in the past four months.

I hopped in the car and drove out my long lane, carefully locking the gate behind me. Fifteen minutes later, I was pulling into the tiny town of Silverside.

I arrived at the Silverside Hotel just a few minutes before nine-thirty. When I stepped into the dingy lobby, the deafening blare of a soccer game assaulted my ears from the sports bar that doubled as the hotel's restaurant. A couple of elderly patrons stared blankly at the giant TV screen in the dim room, but the place was mostly deserted.

I walked over to the reception desk and rang the bell on the counter. After a short wait, I rang it again. Nobody responded. I shrugged. Small town. They probably didn't get too many hotel guests on a Monday morning.

I wandered into the restaurant and headed for the girl behind the counter. She looked barely old enough to work in a licensed establishment. Her face was plastered with petulance and too much makeup. Her hair was dyed inky black, and piercings winked from her cheek, nose, eyebrow, and lip. Tattooed spiders crawled over her generous cleavage.

"Hi," I yelled over the noise. "I'm looking for Bill Harks."

She sneered. "If you find him, you can have him. He's a shithead."

Great. Just what I needed to hear.

"Where is he?"

"Door behind the reception desk. Knock before you go in. He's probably jerking off."

"Nice."

She shrugged. "Whatever."

I retreated from the din into the comparative quietness of the lobby and eyed the door behind the reception desk uneasily. It was closed. I'd rung the bell twice. This probably wasn't worth the trouble. I really prefer to avoid interrupting a man who's on a hot date with Rosy Palm and her five daughters.

My dilemma resolved itself when the door swung open. An enormous man shambled out and I took an involuntary step back. He was at least six foot six, and he must have weighed well over three hundred pounds. His arms looked like hams. With no neck to speak of, his close-cropped hair gave him a troll-like appearance. His bullet head swivelled slowly toward me and he peered at me out of deep-set eyes.

I put on a noncommittal smile. "I'm looking for Bill Harks."

“You found him.”

I stepped forward, trying to look confident. “I’m Aydan Kelly, the bookkeeper. We had an appointment for nine-thirty.”

I reached out to shake his hand. Serious mistake. I’ve got big hands for a woman. My hand disappeared and he gave a thin smile as he crushed it in his. “You’re late.” My knuckles popped and agony shot through my hand as my arthritic thumb bent back.

I clenched my teeth and kept my face impassive.

He stared down at me for a long moment before releasing my hand. “Come on back to the office.” He turned his back and trundled through the door behind the reception desk. I followed him with the distinct impression that this was a bad, bad idea.

Harks gestured to the chair behind the piled-up desk. “Sit. It’s all there.”

I tried not to visibly detour around him as I walked past. The smell of stale beer and cigarettes overwhelmed me when I perched gingerly behind the desk. He came around behind my chair, and apprehension crawled up my spine. I hate having my back exposed.

The chair sank a couple of inches as he leaned his elbows on its back. He loomed over me, much too close for comfort, and gestured to the computer screen with his free hand. “There you go.”

With an effort, I focused on the program, squeamishly moving the filthy mouse to view the entries. God only knew what was caked on that mouse. I sure as hell didn’t want to know. I squinted at the smeared screen. The last entry was from December of the previous year.

“Is this the latest data entry?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have all your receipts and bank statements for the last seven months?”

“Yeah, I told you. It’s all here.” He stirred through the mess. A fossilized sandwich fell on the floor with a clunk, and he kicked it under the desk. “So how much do you charge?”

“That depends on what exactly you want me to do.”

His cold smile came back, his eyes like pebbles. “What services do you offer?”

I ignored the innuendo. “What I meant was, once all the entries are caught up, will you want me to work once a week, or once a month, or quarterly? And can I take the work home with me, or do you need me to do it here?”

“Once a week. Here. Where I can keep an eye on you.”

Marvellous.

I thought about it for a moment before quoting him a price twenty-five percent higher than my normal rates.

“You’re expensive.”

I stood and turned so I could look him in the eye. “Yes. And it’ll cost you quite a bit up front until I get all the entries caught up. Once everything’s up to date, it’ll probably be a couple of hours a week.”

He straightened and looked me up and down while I suppressed the urge to tell him I’d changed my mind and I didn’t have time for any new clients after all.

He nodded once. “Okay. You can start right away to get caught up. Then once a week after that.”

“I can come by tomorrow at nine.” I beat a hasty retreat without offering to shake his hand again.

Back in my car, I did a whole-body shudder and squeezed liberal amounts of hand sanitizer on my hands. When I arrived at the Greenhorn Cafe, I slipped into their tiny bathroom and washed my hands. Twice.

I greeted the owner, Jeff Latchford, as I stepped out of the washroom. His young, fine-featured face lit up in welcome.

“Hi, Aydan! How’s it going?”

“Fine, how’s the restaurant business this week?”

“Great,” he beamed at me. “I’m so pumped you’re doing our books. Can I get you anything while you work?”

“No, thanks,” I assured him. “But I’ll come sniffing around the counter at lunch time, you can be sure of that.”

“See you then.” He waved me through the building, and I carefully mounted the rickety stairs at the back to knock on the door of their apartment above the cafe.

His wife, Donna, met me at the door and ushered me cheerfully through their spartan living room and into the converted bedroom that held the dilapidated computer desk. “We’re so glad you’re doing this,” she smiled as she left me to my work.

I sat down at the computer with a smile of my own. Their enthusiasm and gratitude was the perfect antidote to Bill Harks.

About an hour later, a tap at the open door roused me from my concentration, and I glanced up to see Jeff hovering in the doorway.

“What’s up, Jeff?” I inquired absently, still half-following my interrupted train of thought.

“We’re doing another fundraiser for the volunteer firefighters,” he said. “Would you like to buy a raffle ticket?”

“Sure, how much?” I mumbled, eyes on the computer screen.

“Twenty-five dollars.”

What the hell, it was for a good cause. I knew Jeff and Donna had worked hard on the last fundraiser, and the firefighters had gotten some much-needed new equipment.

“Okay.” I scrounged in my waist pouch for my wallet and managed to come up with twenty-five dollars in cash. He wrote my name on the ticket and handed me the stub, and I tucked it into my pouch without looking at it, already focused on the next entry.

I was thankful for the absorbing task of data entry, but nervousness set in again as lunchtime approached. At noon, I got up with a sigh and headed downstairs, locking the apartment door behind me.

Jeff and Donna were busy behind the lunch counter, and several people stood in line. I took my place in the queue and surveyed the menu board eagerly. When I'd finished the tasty meal, I dragged my feet out the door.

## CHAPTER 4

I eyed the bland stucco facade of Sirius Dynamics despondently. Nothing good had ever happened to me here. It seemed highly unlikely that today would change that.

I shifted my weight from foot to foot before squaring my shoulders and walking up the steps into the main lobby. The guard looked up from his post behind bulletproof glass when I approached the security wicket.

“Ms. Kelly,” he greeted me noncommittally, and spun the turntable around to disgorge my security fob and the sign-in sheet.

I duly signed my life away and hovered anxiously in the tiny lobby, too tense to sit in one of the four chairs that were its only furnishings.

Promptly at one o'clock, Kane arrived. He greeted me pleasantly, and I did my best not to ogle the broad shoulders and bulging biceps that strained his black T-shirt.

The rear view was almost as good when he stepped up to the security wicket to claim his fob. As he turned back to face me, I determinedly tamped down the memory of the firmly-packed black briefs I knew he wore under those dark jeans. I didn't know if I'd been successful in controlling my face or not, but if he noticed my glassy eyes, he gave no sign.

“Let's go on up,” he said. “And you don't need to wait for me anymore. You can just go on in whenever you get here. You work here now.”

I sighed. “Don't remind me.”

We waved our fobs at the prox pad next to the doors, and they released to give us access to the office areas.

“Second floor?” I questioned, and Kane nodded. I felt some of the tension leak out of my shoulders. “At least we’re above-ground.”

He smiled down at me. “Yes. I know how hard it would have been for you to have to work in the secured area.”

“I honestly don’t know if I could do it,” I admitted. “I can manage it for short stints, but if I had to be down there for days at a time...” I banished the thought as my heart sped up reflexively. Underground bunkers are not happy places for claustrophobics.

When we arrived at the meeting room, Stemp was already seated at the table, his reptilian features expressionless as always. Clyde Webb rose when I entered, his lanky arms and legs seeming only loosely attached to his skinny body. His youthful face split into a grin, and I greeted him with pleasure.

“Spider, how’s it going?”

“Great,” he responded. “Thanks to the IPs you gave me last week, we’ve already been able to track down those two Fuzzy Bunny sites. We’ve got them under surveillance now. I can hardly wait to see if you can track down any more.”

“Guess we’ll find out,” I told him.

I gave Stemp a hard stare as I sat down. Nerves twitched in my stomach. We eyed each other for a few seconds before he spoke.

“You can begin immediately. You’ll have an office on this floor. Your top priority is to decrypt the documents we seized from Harchman’s network last week. A close second priority is to see if you can recreate the virtual connections to Fuzzy Bunny’s network and provide the IP addresses to Webb.”

He paused, and I could tell he was struggling to make his next words non-confrontational. “We would appreciate as much time as you could provide for this.”

I gave him a short nod, trying to stay focused on the importance of the work instead of my personal animosity toward the man. “I’ll do my best. I have three clients to see tomorrow, but I have most of the rest of the week available.”

“Very well.” He stood. “Webb will show you to your office and brief you on his efforts to date. If you need anything, inform Kane, and he will make the necessary arrangements.”

I gave him another short nod, which he returned brusquely before striding from the room.

Spider blew out a long breath. “Yikes. That was like watching somebody blowing up a balloon. I was starting to twitch, just waiting for the explosion.” He turned to me. “You’re... You look really scary when you’re mad,” he said hesitantly.

“I wasn’t mad,” I told him. “This time.”

He gave a feeble chuckle. “If I ever see you as mad as you were last week, I’m going to hide under the table.”

I patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry, I don’t think I could ever get that mad at you. Let’s go find that office.”

The three of us trooped down the hallway a few doors, into a pleasantly bright room containing a desk and chair, along with a small sofa and coffee table. I peeked out the window and took stock of the room with optimism. “This is nice. I can live with this. And I even get a couch.”

Spider returned my smile. “Yes, it’s good to have the couch when you’re going to be in the brainwave-driven network for hours at a time. You stiffen up pretty badly when you’re messing around in virtual reality without moving your real body.”

“Good point,” I said. “I never thought of that.”

“Well, let’s go in, and I’ll point you to where the encrypted files are,” Spider said. “You can have a quick peek, and then we can do some planning.”

I sank onto the couch. “I’m so looking forward to doing this painlessly with a Sirius fob. You have no idea how tired I am of using that network key and getting my brain shredded every time I come out of the network.”

Both men smiled down at me. “I’m glad you don’t have to suffer any more, too,” Spider assured me as he sat in the chair. “That was awful even to have to watch.”

Kane pulled up a chair for himself. “I’ll wait while you go in, and then we can do the planning session when you come out.”

“Great,” I said, and mentally stepped into the white void of the virtual reality network.

Spider popped into existence beside me a second later, and a simulation of corridors and doorways sprang into existence around us. “The files are this way,” he said, and we strode down the virtual hallway.

When we reached the doorway to the file room, he courteously opened the door for me, and I stepped through into the stacks of files.

“Holy crap, there’s a lot in here,” I said. “It didn’t seem like this much when I saw it at Harchman’s.”

Spider shrugged. “I completely gutted their system. There’s probably a lot of irrelevant stuff in here, but I couldn’t decrypt it to find out. That’s your job. Lucky you.”

I sighed. “Yeah, lucky me. Where should I start?”

“How about here?” Spider picked up the nearest file and handed it to me.

I gave him a wry twist of my lips. “Thanks, Einstein.” I flipped the file open and stared at the contents.

My heart sank to my toes. “Oh, shit.”

“What?” Alarm flared in his voice.

“I can’t read it.”

“*What?*” he demanded. “But you could read everything at Harchman’s.”

“Well, I can’t read this. Can you?” I showed him the file, and he shook his head, consternation written on his face.

“Could the files have been changed?” I asked.

“No. They’re exactly as they were.”

“Is it a problem with the network?”

“I doubt it. If there was a problem with the network, you wouldn’t be able to access them at all.”

I snapped the folder shut and flung it back onto the pile. “Goddammit, now what? What could it be?”

Spider stood silently for a few moments before turning an apprehensive face toward me. “I think I might know what the problem is.”

“What?” I demanded. I looked more closely at his face. “Oh, shit, no. No. That would be just too... No.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” he said.

I groaned.

## CHAPTER 5

When I stepped painlessly through the virtual portal and returned my consciousness to my physical body, Kane smiled at me. “I think that’s the first time I’ve ever seen you come out of the network without suffering.”

I glowered. “Don’t rub it in.”

“What’s wrong?” Tension stiffened his shoulders as he leaned forward, frowning. “What is it?”

Spider answered for me. “Aydan can’t read the files. I don’t know why. I’m afraid... I think she might have to use the network key after all.”

“Dammit!” Kane’s fist clenched by his side. “You can’t read anything at all?”

“Nothing. It’s just gibberish.”

“Dammit!”

I felt the same grim lines on my face as I saw on theirs. I sighed. “Let’s go and get the bad news.”

I dragged myself off the sofa and trailed down the hallway. They fell in behind me, and we made the trip back down to the lobby in dispirited silence.

I approached the heavy, steel-framed door reluctantly to bend close to the small aperture for the retinal scan. The featureless door unlatched with a muffled click and I stepped into the cramped chamber beyond it, followed by Kane and Webb.

As the door closed and latched behind us, I stepped a single pace forward to the door at the other side and let it scan me, too. Then I

compulsively counted down the thirty-second time delay, trying not to pay attention to the way the walls and ceiling seemed to shrink toward me. Both men stepped away to give me space, but it didn't help much. The room was only a few feet square. No one spoke.

When the latch released, I snatched the door open with a barely-suppressed gasp. As always, the enclosed concrete stairwell made my heart rate spike in momentary panic.

I walked down the stairs purposefully, trying to hide my shaking legs. At the bottom, I pulled the door open and stepped into the glassed-in corridor of the secured lab area.

The white walls and glass and the constant flow of cool, fresh air helped reassure me. I took several deep breaths, deliberately pushing away the knowledge that I was locked underground.

Both Kane and Webb were watching me and I avoided their eyes while we walked down the hallway to Spider's lab.

He unlocked the door with his prox card and retinal scan, and we all filed into the room.

"Pull up a chair," he said tightly as he unlocked the compartment at the back of his desk drawer.

Kane and I both sat, and I scowled at the tiny circuitry inside the small box Spider handed me. Then I snapped the box closed and removed my security fob, looking from one frowning face to the other.

"Well, this isn't going to get any better for putting it off." I held the box in my hand and stepped into the network void.

This time, both Spider and Kane appeared beside me. Our walk down the virtual hallway had the feeling of a march to execution. Or at least it did to me. I was too absorbed in my own misery to care what the other two were thinking.

When we reached the file room, I hovered unhappily beside the stack of files. Both men watched me, their faces sombre. I sighed and reached for the file I'd opened earlier.

"Son of a fucking bitch."

"What?" they demanded in ragged unison.

I sank to the floor and held my head in my hands. "I can read it just fine."

I rocked back and forth a couple of times and jerked a couple of handfuls of hair. "What the hell did I ever do to the gods to make them this vindictive?" I whined.

Spider knelt beside me. "Aydan, I'm so sorry," he said. He reached for my hand and squeezed it. "This totally sucks."

I looked into his troubled face and gave myself a mental shake. He was so tender-hearted, he was probably more upset about this than I was. My whining wasn't going to make things any better for me, but it was going to make him even unhappier.

I squared my shoulders and got up. "Never mind, Spider. Life goes on. And anyway, it's not like I'm going to be going in and out frequently. A couple of shots of pain a day won't kill me."

"But what if you get kicked out of the network again," he said fearfully as he stood, too. "That was... horrible."

I shrugged, hiding my own dread. "I can't see why that would happen. And you've still got the signalling device, haven't you? So you can signal me to come out whenever you need to."

He nodded, obviously unconvinced.

"Well, that's about as good as it's going to get, then. Let's go break the news to Stemp." I turned and headed for the virtual portal.

I braced myself before stepping out of the brainwave-driven network and back into my physical body. It didn't help.

Pain lanced through my head and for Spider's sake, I managed not to cry out. I clenched my teeth on my reflexive profanity and took a few hissing breaths, holding my head and rocking until the pain subsided.

"I really fucking hate that," I muttered as I straightened up again.

I tucked the tiny box into my pocket and turned to the other two. "Let's go."

"Um," Spider said. "We can't."

"What? Why not?" I demanded, coldness slithering down my spine.

"Well, *we* can," he amended. "But we can't take the key with us. It has to stay down here in the secured facility. Stemp's orders."

"And Briggs's orders, too," Kane added. "Everyone is in agreement on this. It's too much of a risk to take it out of here unless it's absolutely necessary."

I took a deep, steadying breath. Then another. "You mean." I stopped and cleared my throat to keep my voice from squeaking. "You mean, I'm going to have to work down here?"

My voice came out shrilly despite my efforts, and Kane responded instantly, his voice deep and soothing. "Not necessarily. Don't worry, Aydan. Let's go upstairs and talk to Stemp. We'll see what we can work out."

I took another couple of deep breaths and jerkily placed the box in Spider's hand. "I'm going up now. I'll wait for you in the lobby." I grabbed my security fob and walked out, suppressing the urge to flee pell-mell.

By the time the time-delayed door finally opened into the lobby my heart was pounding, and I controlled the need to flail my arms frantically in the open space. I paced slowly around the lobby, willing myself into yoga belly breathing. Slow and steady. In. Out. Like ocean waves. I surreptitiously wiped my sweaty palms on my pants.

By the time Webb and Kane reappeared, I'd regained a semblance of calm. I met their worried gazes steadily, and nobody said anything while we made our way up to Stemp's office on the second floor.

Kane tapped on the door and stuck his head inside at Stemp's terse, "Yes."

"We have a complication," Kane said.

"Already?" Stemp's normally expressionless voice sounded strained. "Come in, then. What is it?"

We stepped into his office and stood side by side like pupils summoned before the principal. I tried not to fidget while something small and frightened skittered in my stomach.

Kane stood at parade rest and addressed Stemp. "The Sirius security fob works to get Aydan into the network, but when she gets there, she can't decrypt the files."

Stemp turned a sceptical gaze on me. "Really."

My temper flared instantly, and Kane shot me a warning glance. This time I heeded him and controlled my anger with an effort of will.

"We've solved the problem, though," I said steadily. "I can read the files if I use the network key to access the network."

"I see." Stemp turned his impassive face to Spider. "Explanation."

Spider twitched his shoulders nervously. "I don't know for sure. My initial guess would be that the brainwave modulator that's built into the Sirius fobs alters Aydan's natural brainwave pattern in a way that prevents her from decrypting the files. The network key doesn't have a modulator, so she can do what she needs to do."

Stemp made an impatient gesture. "Why are you bringing this to me? You've already solved the problem. Get to work."

"We need your permission to bring the network key aboveground," Kane said.

"Absolutely not."

Kane took a breath and spoke steadily. His shuttered cop face and deliberately relaxed posture made his words seem conversational. “Aydan is claustrophobic. She has severe difficulty being in the secured facility for any significant length of time. She needs to work up here.”

“I repeat, absolutely not,” Stemp said flatly. “The risk is too great. If anything happens to that network key, we lose everything.”

He turned to me, and I caught the almost-imperceptible glint of triumph in his snake-like eyes. “You will have to learn to tolerate working in the secured facility.”

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